

U.S. v. James Grant et al.
U.S. v. David Villanueva et al.

Prepared Remarks of U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
June 20, 2016

Good afternoon. My name is Preet Bharara, and I am the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

We are here today, *again*, to announce public corruption charges – this time, at some of the highest and most sensitive levels of the New York City Police Department.

The alleged conduct violates the basic principle that public servants are to serve the public, not help themselves to cash and benefits just for doing their job.

Today we allege two separate and serious criminal schemes involving the bribery of officers who were sworn to uphold the rule of law. In one, private citizens spent well over \$100,000 for all manner of official police actions; in the other, officers subverted public safety by putting hard-to-get gun licenses up for sale.

In all, we have charged four senior NYPD officers. One has already pled guilty.

The other defendants are innocent until proven guilty, but we intend to prove every allegation in a federal court as soon as we get the chance.

Let me describe the alleged bribery schemes at more length.

The first, described in a detailed complaint, involves the alleged corruption of two commanding officers:

Michael Harrington, the former executive officer of the Chief of Department's Office, which supervises all uniformed police officers in the NYPD.

Deputy Inspector James Grant, the former commanding officer of the 19th Precinct on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Over a period of years, these two police officials allegedly engaged in an egregious quid-pro-quo relationship with two private citizens: Jeremy Reichberg, a Brooklyn man who held himself out as an "NYPD liaison," and a real estate businessman who was a friend of Reichberg, now cooperating with the government. They spent well over \$100,000 in bribe money to get what they wanted.

What did Reichberg and the cooperating witness get in return for bribes? They got, in effect, a private police force for themselves and their friends. Effectively, they got "cops on call."

When they needed to get somewhere quick, they called on Grant and Harrington for a police escort, and they got it – lights, sirens, and all;

When they wanted to go to a parade or other important event in the City, they got VIP access, courtesy of Grant and Harrington;

When Reichberg’s jewelry business had problems with customers and competitors, he asked for and got help from Harrington to help settle the disputes.

When they or their friends got pulled over, they were able to get out of trouble, including a friend of Reichberg who according to an officer at the precinct was “driving like a lunatic” into traffic and running red lights. As the Complaint describes, this friend appears to have gotten away with this dangerous driving without any consequence, in real time.

And, they even got help obtaining gun licenses from the NYPD, with Reichberg able to use Grant and his connections at the gun licensing division to get a full carry license within days, despite a process that normally takes months;

As described, Reichberg and the cooperating witness showered Officers Harrington and Grant with bribes in exchange for this official action:

Vacations and expensive trips, including for Grant, a Super Bowl weekend jaunt to Las Vegas by private jet.

Hotel rooms for Grant and his family in Rome worth over \$1,000, and \$6,000 worth of hotel rooms for Harrington and his family for a trip to Chicago;

\$12,000 worth of work done for free replacing railings and windows in Grant’s home;

Over \$75,000 in private security jobs for a security company run by Harrington’s family;

And countless expensive meals, sporting events, and gifts for both officers and their families.

By the way, as also alleged, Officer Grant got so used to these lavish gifts that when they didn’t come quickly or often enough, he was not shy about making demands:

On January 2015 call with Reichberg, recorded pursuant to a court-authorized wiretap, two years after the Super Bowl trip to Las Vegas, Grant complained that he hadn’t been invited that year: “you don’t invite me to the Super Bowl, what the f***?”

Grant also complained that his two “elves,” referring to Reichberg and the cooperating witness, had not come by with gifts that Christmas – as they had done in prior years.

For their roles in bribing Officers Harrington and Grant, Reichberg was also charged and arrested this morning. His friend, the real estate businessman, has pled guilty and is cooperating with the government.

I mentioned that one of the benefits Reichberg and the cooperating witness got was help getting gun licenses. That brings me to the second criminal scheme – one that corrupted a function at the heart of what law enforcement does, keeping our citizens safe.

David Villanueva, an NYPD Sergeant and a supervisor in the Licensing Division, allegedly took bribes for years from Alex Lichtenstein, a so-called “expediter,” in exchange for pushing through gun license applications.

Lichtenstein charged clients who wanted gun licenses upwards of \$18,000, and he in turn gave Villanueva thousands of dollars. Villanueva himself gave some of that bribe money to Police Officer Richard Ochetal, who worked under Sergeant Villanueva in the Licensing Division.

In addition to the cash, Lichtenstein allegedly also gave Villanueva and Ochetal bottles of liquor and limousine rides.

In exchange, Villanueva and Ochetal pushed Lichtenstein’s applications through – without doing all the necessary checks or getting all the information they needed to properly approve gun license applications.

And what was the result of this corruption? Not surprisingly, gun licenses were issued to people who had no business having them.

The over 100 Lichtenstein clients who ultimately got gun licenses allegedly included:

One person who had previously been arrested for bribing a public official and for assault; and

Another who had been arrested for forgery, had 10 moving violations and 3 vehicle-related summonses, and had been the subject of at least four domestic violence complaints, including one in which he allegedly threatening to kill someone.

Since our investigation began, the NYPD has taken steps to revoke the licenses for those who should not have gotten them, but during the allegedly corrupt scheme, the gun licensing process, meant to safeguard the public, was dangerously compromised.

Lichtenstein was previously charged in a complaint and arrested on April 18. Sergeant Villanueva is now charged in an indictment with Lichtenstein, and was arrested this morning. Officer Ochetal has pled guilty to his crimes, and is now cooperating with the government.

To successfully investigate important and sensitive cases like these, we need strong partners. And we have very strong partners in the FBI and the NYPD.

I want to thank the FBI, represented here today by Diego Rodriguez, Assistant Director-in-Charge of the New York Field Office. Specifically, I want to thank and acknowledge Supervisory Special Agent Jared Witmier and Special Agents Joseph Downs, Bard Hubbard, Michael Buscemi, Blaire Toleman, Jennifer Ranucci, and Jason Alberts.

I also want to thank the NYPD, represented here today by Commissioner William Bratton, for their work on this and other related corruption cases. I specifically want to thank and acknowledge Deputy Commissioner Joe Reznick, Lieutenant Brian Sparber, and Sergeant Marc Klausner, all of the Internal Affairs Bureau.

Finally, I want to thank the investigators and career prosecutors in my office who have worked on case: Assistant United States Attorneys Martin Bell, Russell Capone, and Kan Nawaday, supervised by Andrew Goldstein, the Chief of our Public Corruption Unit.

Standing here just two weeks ago announcing another public corruption case, I said that we will be as aggressive as ever in exposing corruption wherever we find it, and I said that it was too bad that we seem to find it everywhere we look. Unfortunately, that now includes within the NYPD.

When corruption subverts public safety that is especially tough to take. It can tear at the very fabric of our society. It makes people wonder whether those entrusted to protect and serve them, are in fact doing that.

That is why cases like these are so important. And that is why we pursue and prosecute public corruption vigorously, everywhere we find it.

Days like today are not easy or pleasant for people in the business of law enforcement. It is not pleasant to investigate, arrest, prosecute, and punish your fellows in law enforcement, who took the same oath that you did. And it is not easy to see police officers bring dishonor to an institution deserving of the greatest honor.

It is a heartbreaking thing. But it is our duty to enforce the law and to uphold the rule of law – and to do so perhaps most unflinchingly when we come across people who have chosen to breach that sacred duty, because an officer who betrays his badge betrays every honorable officer, as well as every member of the public.

The NYPD, in my view, is the finest police force in the world and has done more to protect our city and keep us safe than any comparable force, in any city, anywhere.

And I am proud to work with a police department (and a commissioner) that has the courage to police itself, as it has shown today, which is a lot more than I can say for some other institutions.